



NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

STRATEGIC FORUM

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

20010924 133

Number 155, January 1999

Turkey's Year of Living Dangerously

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Conclusions

- Turkey's generals temporarily resolved what they viewed as the country's most serious political crisis in 1997 by forcing the resignation of the government led by the leader of the Islamist Refah Party.
- The next civilian government, which resigned in late 1998, was too weak to direct policy or to govern the generals. A leader is being sought to put together a new government. New elections, whenever held, are unlikely to resolve the tensions between military and civilian leaders.
- Disputes with Greece over Cyprus and missile deployments, and with Syria over support for anti-Turkish Kurdish terrorists, pose a serious threat to Mediterranean security.
- Turkey is becoming increasingly alienated from Europe due to its virtual civil war against the Kurds of southeastern Turkey and anti-Ankara Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq, and a poor human rights record. An unintended consequence has been closer ties with the United States, although some Turkish policies continue to differ from current U.S. policy.
- Turkey's expanding ties to Israel are drawing condemnation from its neighbors in the Arab and Muslim Middle East. The ties, which include military upgrades, arms sales, and intelligence cooperation, raise accusations of hostile encirclement and malevolent intent from Damascus, Tehran, and Cairo.

Background: The Stealth Coup

The intervention by the Turkish military in June 1997, its fourth since 1960, was the first to stop short of a direct takeover of the government. The confrontation with civil authority began in early 1997, when the National Security Council, dominated by the Turkish General Staff, declared *reactionism*—Islamist activism—to be a greater threat to Turkish security than *separatism*—the insurrection headed by the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). The General Staff stepped up its campaign in February 1998 when it announced a series of demands outlining what was permissible and what was banned to protect the security of the state and the legacy of secularism as defined by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the modern Turkish Republic in the 1920s. The restrictions banned some forms of religious education, mosque construction, and the wearing of Islamic clothing (the *hijab* or headscarf for women and girls, the turban for men). They also provided for monitoring the media and prohibited politicians and

government officials from "contradicting the principles of the republic."

Military leaders insisted the government enforce the demands. When Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz tried to distinguish areas appropriate for military scrutiny—national security issues, such as the Kurdish insurgency—from areas of governance appropriate for civilian government oversight—education and dress code policy—the Turkish General Staff warned that "No one, for the sake of his personal interests or ambitions . . . can confuse, weaken, or overshadow the Turkish armed forces' determination to fight separatist or fundamentalist activities."

The Turkish General Staff: Preserving the Past

The military is Turkey's oldest, most disciplined, and most respected institution. It enjoys a wide measure of popular support, according to opinion polls and most observers of Turkish politics. Its General Staff views the world as hostile and threatening. While the generals apparently believe they have suppressed Turkey's Kurdish militants, Ankara continues to fight the Kurdish rebels of Northern Iraq. The generals also accuse Greece, Iran, and Syria (which has sheltered PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan) of providing assistance to the PKK.

According to the generals, Turkey's Islamists—Muslims with a political agenda—pose the greatest threat to national security and identity. They make no apparent distinction between Islamists with political agendas, Islamists with more radical leanings, Islamists with no political ambitions, and Muslims desiring more personal piety in their daily lives. If Islamists view the 7th century community of the Prophet Muhammad as the ideal, the generals prefer the 1930s, when Ataturk ruled and the Republic seemed safe from domestic challenges. The February 1998 demands emphasized that no concessions would be made to activities that threatened Turkey's democratic, secular, and social state.

In 1998, the generals escalated their campaign against real and suspected enemies of the Republic. The campaign against the Islamists and the Kurds was expanded to include a ban on the Refah Party and possibly its successor, the Virtue Party; trials and jail for Islamist politicians (including Istanbul's mayor, who was convicted of insulting Ataturk); a purge of civil servants appointed by or suspected of sympathizing with the Islamists; and a ban on wearing traditional dress at universities. Following the capture and confession of a senior PKK defector, an unknown number of Turks, including prominent journalists and politicians who had been implicated by the defector, were arrested for allegedly providing aid and comfort to the PKK.

Risks of Domestic Containment

The Islamists are changing the way many Turks think about the state and society. The Islamist goal is to reform society from the bottom up, with the ultimate goal of establishing rule by *shariat* (religious law) rather than the secular, western law codes instituted by Ataturk. Reform since Ataturk has been based on a top-down theory, with the military as the model, definer, and purveyor of modernization and reform. Many Turks agree with the military that Turkey should remain secular and democratic and that growing Islamist influence and power risk the freedoms they prize, but the current repressiveness of the generals raises concerns among secularists and Islamists alike about civil rights and abuse of power. Turks are becoming more polarized than they were in 1997 when the military began its confrontation with the Refah-led government.

The military risks losing popular support as its repression of suspected enemies increases and the generals deny space for personal piety or dissenting political opinion. The military still enjoys a

reputation for honesty and integrity, qualities not always observed in the country's civilian politicians. However, some intellectuals, while they back a secular, westernized Turkey, also discreetly criticize the military for heavy-handed tactics and for deliberately leaking or planting false information about who sympathizes or supports Kurdish activists in order to act against suspected sympathizers. The generals also risk a backlash from a broader spectrum of Turkish society than previously thought—lower and middle class elements who favor secularism *and* more personal piety; and younger military officers who may favor a degree of personal piety but keep quiet rather than endanger their careers. Finally, the military's intolerance could provoke confrontation with student demonstrators and groups as universities reopen and women wearing the *hijab* are denied entrance or refused permission to take exams.

Disappointment in Europe

The greatest disappointments for the Turks and the most serious risks to regional security in 1998 came in Europe. Once again, first in Luxembourg in December 1997 and then in Cardiff in June 1998, the Turks were denied the opportunity to join with 12 other governments in applying for membership in the EU. And to make the point of omission more painful, Greek Cyprus was among those invited to apply for EU membership. Moreover, the European Customs Union failed to make promised payments to Turkey for its participation in the European Monetary Union, and some trade in foodstuffs was canceled in the spring of 1998.

Turkish civilian politicians were quick to condemn the European actions as racist, reactionary, and anti-Muslim. The Turkish General Staff, however, values its membership in NATO and participation in European peacekeeping and other activities above all other ties. It has chosen to ignore the actions by the EU and gloss over trade imbalances while pursuing closer ties to Germany and other European countries.

The risk to regional security is far more grave. Turkey and Greece have long held rival claims to Cyprus and islands, airspace, and the continental shelf in the Aegean Sea. Ankara and Turkish Cypriot leaders insist that two states be recognized on Cyprus. Athens demands the withdrawal of the 30,000 Turkish troops occupying the island. Athens also prefers to take the issue of the Aegean islands to the International Court of Justice, where it would almost certainly win. Turkey refuses adjudication. Both have overflowed Cyprus and sent combat aircraft to the island in contravention of international restrictions. Both have threatened to make good on promises to conclude virtual union with their Cypriot clients. To underscore its security concerns, Greek Cyprus purchased S-300 anti-aircraft missiles from Moscow. Turkey has warned it will not allow the deployment of the missiles, which Russia has not yet delivered.

Enhancing Partnership

Turkey's relations with the United States improved considerably in 1998. The improvement reflects, in part, the EU's rejection of Turkey and the removal of 'irritants' in U.S.-Turkish ties. These included the delivery of three frigates and Cobra helicopters to Turkey. In addition, U.S. efforts in support of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, trade and investment, and security cooperation have been welcomed in Ankara. U.S. foreign assistance to Turkey has ended, however, and Ankara is troubled by U.S. attitudes on several issues:

The Middle East Peace Process: Turkey probably assumes that better relations with Israel are viewed favorably in Washington, but Ankara has been uncomfortable with seeming U.S. vacillation in advancing the peace process. The generals seem to be out-of-step with many Turks who prefer closer ties to Muslim states rather than Israel. Ankara is even more unsettled by the prospect that Syria will enter

negotiations and gain U.S. and Western approval. If Damascus were to sign on to peace with Israel and draw down its forces on the Golan, where would Syrian troops be deployed? For the Turkish generals, the answer is the Turkish border. But, the Turks also worry about a Syria without Assad, believing Syria needs a strong ruler to keep the PKK under wraps and to observe water agreements.

Iraq: Sanctions on Iraq are unpopular with most Turks, and Ankara is growing increasingly uncomfortable with a U.S. policy that is unpopular among its Muslim citizens and of little economic value. The generals claim to agree with the U.S. position that Iraq's efforts to acquire and develop WMD represent a danger to the region, but agreement is probably intended more for U.S. consumption than Turkish. U.S. policy supports the territorial integrity of Iraq, while Turkey advocates its political and territorial integrity. The difference is Turkish willingness, and perhaps preference, to deal with Saddam Hussein rather than a weak successor or a chaotic civil war, either of which could result in renewed Kurdish rebellion and threats to Turkish security.

Iran: Turkey's generals have accused Iran of supporting terrorism and encouraging an Islamic revolution in Turkey similar to the 1979 revolution in Iran. Some observers say that anti-Iranian attitudes among Turkey's generals are the result of the close ties they had with the Shah's military leaders, many of whom sought refuge in Turkey after the revolution. Nevertheless, Turkey's civilian governments—both the Islamist-led Erbakan government and the secular regime of Yilmaz—have actively sought to improve diplomatic and trade ties with Tehran.

Russia: Russians have a long history of fighting Turks in Europe and Central Asia. Despite the benefits of Russian trade, tourism, and expatriate earnings, Ankara sees Moscow as a threat to Turkish economic and cultural expansion in the Turkic republics of Central Asia.

Outlook Bleak

The outlook for Turkey is bleak. Elections, regardless of when they are held, may result in another weak civil government while the General Staff pursues its list of real and imagined opponents. Most observers of Turkish politics believe the generals will not abandon democratic practices, although they may continue trying to manipulate the process and the politicians. Turks agree that their political system is in crisis, but it is unlikely that civilian leaders, parliamentarians, or political parties will be able to resolve this problem. There appear to be no new civilian political leaders on the horizon.

Most participants of a workshop on Turkey, held at National Defense University in May 1998, believed that Turkey would not directly attack the S-300 missiles if deployed, but they felt that the risk of an unintended or deliberate incident over Cyprus or the Aegean islands is very high. For example, a Greek radar lock-on to Turkish aircraft overflying airspace claimed by Greece would certainly provoke a Turkish response, as it would be an act of war as defined by international conventions. Press sources in Israel and Turkey described training exercises last summer that included dealing with SA-10 missiles, the not-for-export version of the Russian-made S-300.

The EU debate has had widespread and unintended consequences for Turkey:

- It risks further isolating Turkey from Europe. Although the Turkish General Staff has chosen to ignore the EU rejection, a growing number of Turks may turn against lop-sided, pro-European policies at the expense of ties with Muslim and Central Asian countries.
- It pushes Turkey closer to the United States. Ankara looks to Washington to mitigate the

anti-Turkish trend in the EU and the failure of the European Customs Union to deliver promised funding. Ankara was persuaded to support NATO enlargement, but it is unlikely to back future expansion. It may distance itself from U.S. interests by expanding ties to Iran and reopening full relations with Iraq.

- It also brings new importance to ties with Israel. The Turkish General Staff sees Israel as a source of military hardware to modernize its armed forces, weapons and system upgrades, should they be denied if the United States were to reimpose an arms embargo. This relationship will increase in importance if European and U.S. assistance in modernizing the Turkish military is denied.

Several kinds of crises could arise:

- Accidental or intentional confrontation with Greece over missile deployments on Cyprus or another island.
- Confrontation between students and the military when students wearing the *hijab* or other forms of traditional dress are denied entrance to universities and refused permission to take exams.
- A growing unease among younger military officers who may favor a degree of personal piety but keep quiet rather than endanger their careers.
- Another flare-up with Damascus over support for Turkish-Kurdish dissidents, the amount of water Ankara releases to Syria, or Turkish military exercises held too near the border.
- Problems with the United States if Israel, which has agreed to upgrade Turkey's aircraft with more advanced missiles, transfers military technology it co-produces with the United States.

Turkey's generals are on guard against the enemy abroad—in the Middle East, Southern Europe, Central Asia, and the Balkans—as well as the enemy within. Ankara expects U.S. assistance in its struggles with the EU and in meeting its economic and defense requirements. The Turks also believe Washington is too complacent about Russian intentions in Central Asia and the Caucasus, too willing to accommodate Syria in the peace process, and too uncompromising in its sanctions policies on Iran and Iraq. Several actions by the United States could help ease Turkish concerns about its external threats and internal security risks:

- Assist Turkish economic self-sufficiency by supporting construction of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline and increasing U.S. trade and investment.
- Keep Turkey engaged in Europe by urging the EU to reconsider Turkish membership and encouraging the European Customs Union to release promised funds to Turkey. NATO could expand joint military training opportunities such as the Partnership for Peace exercises in Central Asia. The United States should try to convince EU members that engagement is a more effective means of moderating Turkish behavior than isolation. At the same time, Turkey's generals should be encouraged to be less intrusive in the country's domestic political life and less restrictive on the institutions of civil society.
- Continue to work on confidence-building measures between Athens and Ankara and discourage Moscow from delivering the S-300 missiles. In previous potentially dangerous scenarios, war has been avoided because both sides agreed on face-saving measures to defuse tensions. Renewed

mediation, perhaps to include other NATO members, might have greater impact than solo U.S. efforts. The United States should also support Arab efforts to repair relations between Ankara and Damascus.

- Institutionalize U.S.-Turkish military relationships. One observer sees strength in the personal relationships that have developed between senior Turkish and U.S. military officials. But others warn of too much reliance by U.S. and Turkish militaries on personal relationships and too little awareness on the part of the United States of where Turkish society is heading. One scholar warned that the apparent warmth of U.S.-Turkish military-to-military relations was restricted to senior officers and may not permeate the lower levels of the Turkish military.

U.S.-Turkish relations were the topic of a roundtable of specialists held at National Defense University in May 1998. Dr. Judith S. Yaphe is a Senior Fellow of INSS. Comments or questions should be referred to Dr. Yaphe at 202-685-2224 or e-mail yaphej@ndu.edu.

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INTERNET DOCUMENT INFORMATION FORM

A . Report Title: Turkey's Year of Living Dangerously

B. DATE Report Downloaded From the Internet: 09/24/01

**C. Report's Point of Contact: (Name, Organization, Address, Office
Symbol, & Ph #):** National Defense University Press
Institute for National Strategic Studies
Washington, DC 20001

D. Currently Applicable Classification Level: Unclassified

E. Distribution Statement A: Approved for Public Release

F. The foregoing information was compiled and provided by:
DTIC-OCA, Initials: __VM__ **Preparation Date** 09/24/01

The foregoing information should exactly correspond to the Title, Report Number, and the Date on the accompanying report document. If there are mismatches, or other questions, contact the above OCA Representative for resolution.